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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Radio Service
OFFICE OF INFORMATION

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT Saturday, March 26, 1938

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "TERMITE FACTS AND FALLACIES." Information from the Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine, United States Department of Agriculture.

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J. B. Labat, in a work written in 1724 mentions that he found infested wood with white ants as early as 1696 and said these insects were common throughout the then known parts of America. Back in the spring of 1868 two entomologists were traveling in Florida and saw a swarm of flying antlike insects they recognized as termites. A few years later these same men wrote about seeing houses in the South that had been damaged by termites. Then, in 1872, a scientist up in Cambridge, Massachusetts saw a swarm of termites coming out of a board lying near the Cambridge Museum. And in 1877 someone else reported termite damage to a railroad engine house in Missouri.

These happen to be among the earliest records of termite damage in this country. You will notice that they came from three different parts of the country--Florida, Massachusetts and Missouri. So they are pretty good proof that one commonly believed idea about termites is wrong -- the idea that termites have been spreading from the Tropics of the South to the North in recent years.

The entomologists will tell you that termites were in New England long before the Pilgrim fathers arrived. In fact, they were probably well distributed over this country ages ago. They were inhabitants of the forest primeval before the Indians and were in the Garden before Adam and Eve. Fossil remains of termite colonies that date back 55 million years have been found in this country. So all this talk about the termite menace advancing northward is, to use a slang phrase, just so much bunk.

What's more, the termite is a menace only by happenstance, you might say. In the forest termites are extremely useful. Ordinarily, the destructive species eat only dead wood so they clear the way for living trees to grow, and also enrich the soil. It was only when man moved into their domain, cut down the forests and put up poorly constructed wooden buildings that they began to give trouble. But you can't blame them for taking their meals where they find them. They don't know the difference between dead wood in a house and in a forest.

Another mistaken idea about termites is that these insects are increasing in numbers at a great rate. The entomologists believe quite the contrary. They say that the termite population of this country today is probably far smaller than when forests covered most of the land. Termites have turned to houses since much of their natural food was taken away, so their damage has increased somewhat.

These are a few examples of the many mistaken notions about termites that people have today. Mr. R. A. St. George of the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine often remarks that people have become "termite-conscious" in the last 5 or 10 years. That is a conservative way of putting it. A good many property owners have become termite-terrified in recent years and have

believed all sorts of exaggerated and mistaken tales about these insects. Especially in the spring and fall, Mr. St. George's desk is likely to hold many letters from fearful folks who have seen a swarm of flying ants on a sunny window sill and are wondering if this means that their house is likely to collapse at any moment from termite damage.

Mr. St. George explains that termites are not ants even though they have often been called "white ants." Actually ants are enemies of termites. But it happens that spring and fall are the usual seasons for romance among both ants and termites. At this time some of the insects have wings and pair off to found new colonies. The winged termites are never the ones that damage wood. It is their descendants, the blind white workers, the hidden termites, that cause all the trouble.

Mr. St. George says the best way to tell the difference between flying ants and flying termites is to look at the insect's waistline. Ants have a wasplike waistline while that of termites is not constricted. There are other differences but this is an easy one to remember.

Even if the insects you find happen to be bona fide termites, that doesn't mean that your house is in immediate danger. You have plenty of time to investigate -- to study up on these insects and learn which control treatment will be most effective and economical in your particular case. Department of Agriculture entomologists have been doing research on termites since 1912. They have plenty of information that will help you.

After all these years of studying the termite, Department scientists are agreed that the real answer to the termite problem is proper construction of buildings. If the foundation of a new house is laid so that these insects cannot go from the ground to the wood in the house, can't form the secret tunnels that carry them back and forth to get moisture from the ground, the owner of the house will never have termite trouble. The future existence of the termite really depends on architects and builders -- and owners. If you are building a new home, be sure the architect or contractor or carpenter builds the termites out. You can get termite-proof building information from the Department of Agriculture.

Now, if termites are already in your house, first send for all possible information on controling them. You can often put in very simple inexpensive repairs that will end their existence. If you find that termite-proofing your house would be a very costly job, would seem more expensive repairs than you can afford such as making over the whole foundation of your house, then you may prefer to use the less permanent control method of poisoning the ground. Department of Agriculture scientists have found that a mixture of coal tar, creosote and kerosene is one effective poison and that orthodichlorobenzine is another. A thorough application of such poisons should remain effective for 4 or 5 years.

Now about the termite publications. You are welcome to a copy as long as the Department of Agriculture's free supply lasts. First, "Injury to Buildings by Termites", Leaflet 101, for the control of subterranean termites, and second, Farmers' Bulletin No. 1472 where additional information is desired relative to the dry wood termites. For the benefit of those desiring information relative to new construction to termite proof their buildings, request Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine Brief E-338.

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